

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 002171

SIPDIS

FOR NEA/ARPI BERNNS; LONDON FOR GOLDRICH

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/21/2015

TAGS: PREL PGOV PHUM SOCI PINR KWMN KU

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR MEETS CANDIDATE FOR FIRST WOMAN CABINET
MINISTER AND RUNS INTO FIRST DECLARED WOMAN CANDIDATE FOR
THE 2007 ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS

REF: A. KUWAIT 2093

1B. KUWAIT 2064

Classified By: Ambassador Richard LeBaron for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1 (C) SUMMARY: On May 22, Ambassador called on Dr. Rasha Al-Humoud Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. Dr. Rasha, (as she is known), told the Ambassador she wants to be the first woman member of the Kuwaiti cabinet and has heard indirectly that she may be appointed by the Prime Minister. She hopes to become Education Minister. Dr. Rasha does not believe women candidates will succeed in their first attempts to be elected in the 2007 elections, and therefore believes it is critical that a "liberal, progressive woman" be appointed to the cabinet in order to maintain the momentum on women's political rights and address frontally the caveat in the rights legislation regarding adherence to Shari'a. She wants to be Education Minister, where she realizes she would need to conduct guerrilla warfare in order to be effective. While waiting for Dr. Rasha, the Ambassador chatted with journalist Aisha Al-Rsheid, who was described in the press on May 22 as the first woman to formally declare her candidacy for the 2007 parliamentary race. She is running in Keifan, a conservative district currently represented by an Islamist. Ms. Al-Rsheid told the Ambassador, "I want to be just like Condoleezza Rice." (Five other women's names have appeared in the press as possible candidates, including Rola Dashti, and other leaders of the women's movement: human rights attorney Dr. Badriya Al-Awadi; Khadija Al-Muhamid; environmentalist Fatima Al-Abdali; and professor Dr. Ma'asouma Al-Mubarak.) END SUMMARY.

12. (C) Dr. Rasha Al-Humoud Al-Jaber Al-Sabah started a May 22 meeting with the Ambassador by thanking the United States for the support resulting in the realization of full political rights for Kuwaiti women on May 16 (ref B). The Ambassador congratulated Dr. Rasha and gave credit to the women of Kuwait for their sustained efforts to achieve their rights. The Ambassador also pointed to the role of the new strategic environment in the Middle East, in which President Bush has made it clear that progress on issues of democracy is a key element of the U.S. approach to security.

13. (C) Dr. Rasha said that in a conversation a few days before the May 16 vote in the National Assembly on women's rights, she had spoken with advisor to the PM, Muhammad Abdallah Abdulhassan. She speculated to him that delays in scheduling the date for a visit at the White House by Prime Minister Shaykh Sabah could be attributed to Washington irritation regarding the GOK's performance on the issue. She said the visit might be delayed, cancelled or, if the Prime Minister went to the U.S. without women's rights being passed, he would receive a "thrashing." Ambassador confided that indeed we took this issue very seriously, but that Kuwait is a strong ally across the board, and she should not read too much into the details of visit scheduling, but that certainly democracy issues are important aspect of our high level dialogue with the GOK.

Need a Woman Minister -- Like Me

14. (C) When asked about next steps in pursuing implementation of women's political rights, Dr. Rasha advised the Ambassador ("off the record") on the possibility of her becoming the first woman minister in Kuwait. She said that she had learned from sources close to the Prime Minister that she was being considered as a possible minister. Because she is from the Al-Sabah family and due to tradition, she would not be able to run and would be discouraged from voting in future elections and thus would have to be appointed by the Prime Minister. Dr. Rasha pointed out that the next step ought to be for the Kuwaiti government to name a woman cabinet minister as soon as possible. She said that she would be an ideal candidate because of her family ties, her qualifications, and her ability to work with liberals, Salafis, ikhwan (Muslim Brotherhood), Shi'a and all other segments of Kuwaiti society. She stressed the need for the first woman minister to be of high caliber. She called herself a "fida-eyah"--a fighter--and was willing and able to be a lightening rod as a woman minister. Furthermore, her presence in the Government, as a woman without hijab, would

send a clear message safe-guarding the rights of non-Muslim Kuwaitis as well as other Kuwaiti women who choose not to wear the hijab, countering the provision about respect for Shari'a law found in the legislation granting political rights to women.

15. (C) When the Ambassador asked whether she would be a candidate for the currently vacant health minister position, Dr. Rasha said that she might be, but that she would strongly prefer to become Education Minister. She claimed that the incumbent, Rashid Hamad Muhammad Al-Hamad, is tired of the job and has "been begging to leave the government," and that the Prime Minister is not pleased with his performance anyway. She said that the education system was in dire need of reform, including the need to tackle the College of Shari'a, which is "breeding extremists," and the general education system as a whole. She said that one need is to establish Kuwaiti history/civics courses. Dr. Rasha said that there can be no real political reform without education reform. She also noted that the Ministry needs to establish the appropriate accreditation board for universities and is falling behind other GCC members in this field. The Ambassador noted the availability of MEPI and other assistance and offered assistance in curriculum reform and in civic education, but Dr. Rasha demurred, noting that she has no influence on general educational issues from her current position.

16. (C) Dr. Rasha said that women will probably not be elected in 2007. She characterized the election system as extraordinarily difficult and draining, in financial and personal terms. She hoped to see the Government and Parliament address the legislation pending on reduction of the number of electoral districts. (Note: Larger districts would to some degree reduce the amount of "retail politics" needed to get elected, and make it far more expensive to buy a seat.)

The First Candidate

17. (C) While waiting to see Dr. Rasha, the Ambassador met Ms. Aisha Al-Rsheid, a journalist for the Al-Watan newspaper and the first declared female candidate for the 2007 elections. The headline of the May 22 Kuwait Times read, "Businesswoman Takes on Salafis." Ms. Al-Rsheid is a member of a well-known Kuwaiti family, and she would be running in the heavily fundamentalist Keifan district. During the brief discussion with the Ambassador, Al-Rsheid said, "I want to be just like Condoleezza Rice." The Ambassador asked whether that meant she wanted to be Foreign Minister, to which Ms. Al-Rsheid replied that indeed she did, but was not quite ready to push out current FM Shaykh Dr. Mohamed Al-Sabah.

Comment

18. (C) Women's political rights continues to dominate discussion and the headlines in Kuwait. Positive statements by the President, the First Lady, the Vice President, and Secretary Rice have received front page coverage.

SIPDIS

Bio Note

19. (U) Dr. Rasha is from the Jaber branch of the ruling family. One brother, Mubarak, is governor of the Mubarak Al-Kebir governorate and another, Salem, is married to Shaykha Amthal, women's rights and environmental activist and sister of the Amir. Dr. Rasha is also a first cousin to the Amir, the PM, Interior Minister Shaykh Nawaf, and Deputy Commander of the National Guard Shaykh Mishaaal. She was born November 18, 1951 and studied languages in the UK and the U.S. She matriculated at Yale, earning several degrees: MA in modern languages (she speaks seven), MS in philosophy, and a PhD. She taught English and English literature at Kuwait University and has served as Under Secretary for Higher Education since 1993. From 1992-1993, she was Director of the Political Affairs Department in the Amiri Diwan. Dr. Rasha is also celebrated for her 1990 establishment of the first mixed diwaniya in Kuwait.

Visit Embassy Kuwait's Classified Website:
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/kuwait/>

You can also access this site through the
State Department's Classified SIPRNET website

LEBARON